



National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights

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N. Paul Divakar
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Dr. Ruth Green
President, California Board of Education
State Board of Education
1430 N Street, Room 5111
Sacramento, California 95814

Dear Dr. Ruth,

National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR), a movement led by Dalit human rights activists working to protect and promote the human rights of Dalits¹, writes to protest the interventions by Hindutva forces like the Hindu Educational Foundation (HEF), the Vedic Foundation (VF) and the Hindu American Foundation (HAF) to insert their supremacist propaganda in California textbooks.

The NCDHR is part of a wider struggle to abolish untouchability and to cast out caste. More than fifty years after independence from British rule, caste bondage is still the stark reality confronting the 160 million Dalits living in India. Human Rights Watch has succinctly summed up their predicament²: "Some 160 million (Dalits) live a precarious existence, shunned by much of society ... at the bottom of India's caste system. Dalits are discriminated against, denied access to land, forced to work in degrading conditions and routinely abused at the hands of the police and of higher-caste groups that enjoy the state's protection ... Over 100,000 cases of rape, murder, arson, and other atrocities against Dalits are reported in India each year ... the actual number of abuses is presumably much higher ... these cases are typically related to attempts by Dalits to defy the social order or demand minimum wages and their basic human rights ... In what has been called India's *hidden apartheid*, entire villages in all Indian states remain completely segregated by caste. National legislation and constitutional protections serve only to mask the social realities of discrimination and violence faced by those living below the *pollution line*."

Under these circumstances, mention of caste as a "system of the past" (as suggested by VF) or "erasure of the word Dalit" (as suggested by HEF) is an obfuscation of reality. Far from according respect to Hinduism, sanitization of textbooks to remove references to caste and Dalits only silences our struggles against the prevalence of this inhuman system even today and caste oppression (besides flying in the face of scholarly inquiry). The Hindutva groups may claim negative stereotyping of Hinduism, but brutalities against Dalits continue to be justified on religious grounds. For instance, in November 2002, five Dalits in Haryana were burnt alive on charges of skinning a live cow. "Ravanas (mythical villains) found slaughtering cows had been punished", a local Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP)³ office bearer proclaimed,

¹ Dalits (formerly *untouchables*) are the social outcasts of the Hindu caste system.

² See *Caste: Asia's Hidden Apartheid* at <http://www.hrw.org/campaigns/caste/presskit.htm>

³ The President of HAF, Mihir Meghani, is a former governing council member of VHP America.

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and when asked if a cow's life was more important than that of Dalits, senior VHP leader Giriraj Kishore said, "according to our shastras, the life of a cow is very precious." Such is the vicious hold of hindutva ideology on our personal lives. Temple entry is even today "a denied right" for Dalits and any attempted to enjoy the right of entry into temples is met with mass violence, unleashed on Dalits.

Furthermore, the VF and the HEF want to obfuscate the role of varna in the hierarchical organization of society and the discriminatory allotment of jobs. The fact that we perform *more labor-intensive work* and *dirty work* (as claimed by the HEF edits) is no accident of history but is a direct consequence of the forced lowly status accorded on us by the shastras. That the HEF has completely inverted reality and attributed our untouchability to the *dirty work* we do must surely rank as the epitome of brahminical chicanery. This assertion also makes obvious HEF's brahminical contempt for the dignity of labor; for, after all, if it is our *dirty work* that keeps the rest of the society clean, is it not unfair to consign us to our current menial status? The injustice of the caste system is indeed impossible to rationalize.

In this context, we applaud the interventions by academics in the US and abroad (the petitioning by about 50 academics led by Michael Witzel and by a group of about 130 South Asian academics). As they have pointed out, this is the second such attempt by the Hindutva groups after their unsuccessful attempts to doctor NCERT (National Council of Educational Research & Training) textbooks in India. Once again, these groups have shown themselves incapable of getting out of the brahminical time-warp. The same brahminical mindset that deprived our ancestors of education is now also attempting to restrict the education of students in California. Truth is power, and the liberatory potential of education must indeed be scary for those accustomed to unearned privileges of caste.

We sincerely hope that the California State Board of Education is more interested in historical accuracy than in catering to Hindutva sensibilities. We therefore strongly urge you to reject Hindutva interventions in framing the textbook curriculum and adopt the recommendations of the Heitzman, Witzel & Wolpert Content Review Panel.

Yours Truly,

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dalits. a people. a culture. a history